Anime Fandom of University Students in the United Kingdom: A Study of Subculture

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Abstract: As one of the symbols of Japan's soft power, anime and its related products are influential worldwide. The 21st century has seen a rise in anime studies, and many of them have taken anime fans, or the audience, as the main subject of research. However, existing studies have focused more on Asian countries and the United States, and only a handful researched other regions. From the perspective of subculture, this study explores anime fandom among students in British universities. This study employs a qualitative approach, namely a grounded theory design, interviewing British university students who are from different cultural backgrounds and self-identified as anime fans. This study interviewed six respondents. Interviews were carried out by using open-ended questions and each interview lasted around 25-30 minutes, focusing mainly on the interviewees' experiences with their habitual consumption of anime, related media and products and interaction with the fan group. The responses were coded systematically and analysed in depth with reference to various subcultural and intercultural theories. This study suggests that the consumption of anime by British university students is consistent with the four characteristics put forward by the subculture framework, namely identity, investment of time and money, consistent distinction, and autonomy. Furthermore, it did not find significant geo-cultural specificities in the British university students' anime fandom. This may result partly from the limitations of the sample, but also, to a certain extent, suggests the translocal nature of anime fan culture in the highly globalised digital era.

Keywords: *Anime, Fandom, Subculture, United Kingdom, Qualitative/Grounded Theory*

1. Introduction

Anime is widely used in Japan and English-speaking countries to refer to animations produced in Japan. Well before McGray [1] identified anime as a source of Japan's soft power in 2002, there were already a considerable number of dedicated fans of anime around the world, and many European and American children grew up influenced by this popular media. Considering anime's social and cultural impact, many scholars researched the subject, and many of them focused on anime fans (for instance, see [2] and [3]). Nevertheless, most studies find their subjects in Japan, the United States, and some Asian countries, with anime fandom in other regions largely overlooked. As an anime fan, the author has long been interested in what anime fandom is like in other societies, because, as Benecchi and Wang [4] suggested, fan culture is highly relevant to the social and cultural context, and the fandom of a certain fan object can be rendered in different ways in different societies. Upon coming to the United Kingdom as a study abroad student, the author joined the university's Anime and Manga Society and was impressed by the energy and enthusiasm of the people inside the small yet dedicated group. The experience encouraged the author to conduct this qualitative project to examine how university

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students in the United Kingdom engage in the media and the community of anime. The data for the study was collected from online interviews and analysed based on the subculture framework proposed by Hodkinson [5], which highlights four characteristics of subculture, namely "identity, commitment, consistent distinctiveness and autonomy". Although the small size of the sample brings some limitations to the study, the study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the subcultural phenomenon and explore the fandom of British university students from five aspects: how they perceive the attractiveness of anime; the ways they engage with the media and interact with the fan group; how these experiences affect the fans; and finally, the influence of larger culture on the fandom.

2. Literature Review

In an early study, Newitz [6] examines the anime fan culture in the United States. She sees the quick expansion of the anime fan community in the United States, as demonstrated by many anime events, fan magazines, and student clubs in big cities all over the States. Through multiple interviews and surveys, she finds that many American fans have been attracted by the characters and the exotic Japanese culture portrayed in the works. Moreover, the fan base is culturally and racially diverse, but race does little to affect the preference. Furthermore, she finds out that most members in the group are male and argues that this is because the content of anime resonates with the "male anxieties of sexuality and social power" [6, p.5]. In a later article, Newitz [7] further elaborates on this point, providing insight into the sexuality of anime and how this is nonnegligible in attracting American male fans. Published almost 30 years ago, these studies might lack timeliness, but they present the booming stage of anime fandom outside Japan.

More and more works on anime fandom have come out since the 2010s. Ray et al [8] examine the psychological factors behind the fanship and fandom of anime. The researchers argue for distinguishing fanship and fandom, defining fanship as the passion for the hobby itself, and fandom as the love for the community that shares the hobby [8, pp. 56-57]. The research uses a quantitative method; 923 participants with an average age of 26 fill out questionnaires. The questions use the 7-point Likert-type response scale. The researchers adopt six items for psychological needs, three for fanship, and three for fandom. Based on the survey results, they identify the decisive items of fandom and fanship for female and male fans respectively. It is concluded that while fanship and fandom should be considered separately, the psychological needs of males and females are more alike than different [8, p.62]. A possible weakness of the article is that the design of the point-scale questionnaire might not be able to reflect the respondents' true thoughts. Moreover, the wording of the questions seems ambiguous and might cause misunderstanding for the respondents. Nevertheless, despite the weakness, the results are valid

references for analysing the hidden motivation behind the enthusiasm for anime to a large extent.

In another study, Rich [9] focuses on the anime fandom of American youth. The researcher conducts ethnographic research with 23 participants of both genders and various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. By posing wisely designed interview questions, the researcher finds out how the subjects get to know anime, why they feel attracted to anime, how their passion changes throughout adolescence and into coming of age, and how this experience of anime affects their personal development and self-identification as an adult. Most subjects fall in love with anime when they watch television at home in their childhood. However, as they grow older, their perception of anime and the reason behind their passion might change gradually. Moreover, the researcher argues that their expression of fandom tends to switch from basic consumption behaviour to social or even productive acts [9, p.83]. What makes the study relevant is that, while fandom studies generally focus on one given period of the subject's life, the researcher looks at the perception of and behaviour related to anime in different phases. Additionally, the study finds out that there is a gender division regarding acts among young anime fans, and female fans are more likely to engage in socialisation behaviours [9, p.138].

In a more recent study, Tariq and Nesti Willard [10] look at the anime fandom among university students in the UAE. Based on a grounded theory design, the research is conducted with eight male and eight female students in gender-segregated groups. Despite the unique social and cultural conditions in the UAE, which the researchers point out as "conservative [10, p.199]," the researchers find some fan behaviour and psychological motives that are likely to be shared across national and cultural borders. For instance, the passion for anime tends to guide young Emiratis to learn more about Japan and its culture. Furthermore, the researchers find out four reasons for university students in the UAE to consume anime. First, the beautiful drawing, cute character design, and fascinating plot attract the Emirati youth visually and emotionally. Second, the imaginary world and the perfect daily life presented in the anime serve as a way for young people to escape from the real world. Third, the anime community provides a space for young fans to express themselves. Fourth, the community also offers an opportunity to share with like-minded people. Moreover, similar to Rich [9], Tariq and Nesti Willard also argue that female fans are more likely to participate in social activities.

As mentioned above, anime fan culture in the United Kingdom is largely overlooked by researchers, and Holmes [11] is the first to give a comprehensive introduction of the origin, development, and characteristics of British anime fandom. In the master thesis, she explores the impact of the historical interaction between Japan and the United Kingdom on the United Kingdom's perception of the aesthetics of Japanese culture, thus paving the way for examining how anime culture was perceived and ingrained in the United Kingdom. She then continues to illustrate the rise of anime fandom in the United Kingdom in the 1990s, identifying

some of the major events that caused shifts in social acceptance, fan behaviour, and accessibility of anime. She highlights the advent of the Internet era and argues that while it has its own historical and social specificities, United Kingdom anime fandom is largely affected by the transcultural online fan community [11, p.102]. Another remarkable contribution of the work is the grouping of British anime fans while referring to the generation of anime fans defined by Azuma [12]. Based on more than 200 questionaries, Holmes identifies the demographics and characteristics of each group, pointing out that while the elder generations are largely male, white and heterosexual, younger generations are more diverse in terms of race, gender identity and sexual orientation [11, pp. 18-21]. She also underscores that different racial backgrounds and identities might lead to various experiences in the anime culture and the online community [11, p.103]. Based on this insight, the current study decided to find a group of diverse participants despite the small sample size.

On the other hand, some anime fan studies provide sharp insights into deep-embedded passion and identity, which serve as theoretical bases for the research. Condry [13] dedicates to analysing one perspective of anime fandom, i.e., sexual love for the characters. In the article, the author first discusses the concept of *moe*, which is central to the love of characters for anime fans. The researcher defines it as a love that does not look for payback. Then, he contrasts the most fervent anime fans, *otaku*, with salaryman, a male, white-collar employee. These are two stereotypical Japanese male figures with opposing impressions. He argues that if the salaryman serves as the model of ideal masculinity, *otaku* should be considered a variant of masculinity. It gives an "alternative value" to those other than the traditional successful man. Although *otaku'*s falling in love with a virtual character is usually considered an extreme aspect of fandom, a less radical form of love for characters is prevalent. Many anime fans are attracted by the aesthetic of the characters and the drawing style of the work, so the analysis given in the article is also valuable for general anime fandom [10, p.15]. A possible weakness of the study is that, as a more contemporary work, it largely overlooks the group of female *otaku*, which are also significant in numbers. Although the study mentioned *fujoshi*, the group of female anime fans passionate about content depicting homosexual or homoromantic stories between beautiful boys, it is only a sub-group and cannot represent the whole female fan base.

The previous studies examine anime fandom at different periods in different societies, with participants from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Despite the differences, some studies provide similar insights. For instance, the aesthetic appreciation of the characters and cultural factors are mentioned multiple times as reasons behind anime fandom. Moreover, fan engagement usually moves beyond consuming the media into socialising in the fan community and creative production. However, regarding the gender influence on fan identity and practices, different views have been presented.

After reviewing the existing literature, the author came up with the following research questions. Which aspects of Japanese anime attract university students in the United Kingdom? How do they engage with anime and the fan community, and what do they gain from the experience?

3. Methodology

The great majority of data for the project is collected from six semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 25 to 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams. During the interviews, the participants were asked a set of prepared open-ended questions, each followed by more specific ones based on the response, inviting the informants to elaborate on their points. Two questions were added to the set after the first two interviews, and the first two informants answered the additional questions after the interviews through personal communication. All the interviewees are university students in the United Kingdom and self-identify as anime fans. Two are male, while four are female. Three are domestic students, while three are international students. The participants are also diverse regarding their cultural backgrounds. Two participants were born and brought up in the United Kingdom, and two were born and reared in China and Australia respectively. The other two have dual cultural upbringing. One lived in Mexico and the United States before studying in the United Kingdom, and one was born in Austria before migrating to the United Kingdom. Regarding ethnicity, three are Asian, one is black, one is white, and one is Indo-Aryan. Participants aged between 18 and 21, and all except one, who is an acquaintance of the researcher, were recruited at an anime event at a university in London. For confidentiality, the study will use pseudonyms to refer to the participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with consent from the interviewees, and the coding of the project was mainly based on the automatically generated transcripts while referring to the recorded videos and interview notes.

This study considers anime fandom as an example of subculture. According to the Oxford English Dictionary [14], subculture is defined as "an identifiable subgroup within a society or group of people, especially one characterised by beliefs or interests at variance with those of the larger group". This accords with the essence of anime fandom: a small but vigorous group enjoying the anime culture, which is considered niche or even deviant compared with other popular media forms. Hodkinson [5] proposed four indicative criteria for the substance of subcultures: "identity, commitment, consistent distinctiveness and autonomy". Consistent distinctiveness refers to the similarity in preferences and values of the members that make the group stand out from the majority [5, p.30]. The main consistent distinctiveness of my focus group is the passion for anime. Moreover, several interviewees provided similar responses during the interviews, reflecting other characteristics shared

by the subculture group. The other three criteria will be introduced and used for data analysis.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Attractiveness of Anime

An important finding of this study is that Japanese anime has three main elements that attract university students in the United Kingdom. Most interviewees mentioned the character, the art style, and the story as the appealing aspects of anime, echoing the results of existing studies (for instance, see [10]). Moreover, the reasoning and elaboration of the informants provide new insights.

Regarding the character design, the participants suggested different reasons for the passion for the character. It can be the simple aesthetic appreciation, admiration of inner aspects such as personality, or a combination of both. For instance, Leona said that she is usually attracted by the protagonist of the anime. Giving the protagonist of *Blue Lock* as an example, she commented that his challenging spirit and outstanding individuality make him unique and attractive. "His way of playing is different from the rest," she put, "I think it's nice the way that he pulls through all of the challenges… Like, he's obviously going through an extremely difficult time, but he still manages to get there and I like that perseverance." However, when talking about another favourite character, *Rengoku*, from the *Demon Slayer*, she succinctly said, "I like his face." In the first case, Leona admires the character as a role model from whom she can learn. In the latter, however, the inner traits of the character were unmentioned, which indicates that appearance alone contributes greatly to the successful creation of an attractive character. Another participant, Bard, commented that the female protagonist is the main reason that kept him watching *Gosick* despite the plain development of the plot at the start of the anime. He put, "*Gosick* has a slow start […] I almost gave up after the first five or six episodes, but I have to say that the heroine is so cute. Her cuteness left me with a very deep impression." Later, in his discussion of the narrative and overall quality of the work, the female protagonist's cuteness was also a recurring aspect. His words verify that loveable characters can create a strong grip on the audience, remedying the shortcomings of the story.

The art style is another aspect mentioned by the majority of anime fans. While it slightly overlaps with the visual attractiveness of characters, it is a more overall characteristic of the anime. The visual expression can catch the eyes of the viewers at first sight, attracting people to watch the anime. When talking about how she started watching anime, Elisa said she saw an image from *Fairy Tail* on her friend's phone. She said, "[after] seeing a character whose visuals I liked, I was like, wait, which anime is it? And then I started properly watching anime." Therefore, it is fair to say that the drawing of *Fairy Tail* triggered her interest and made her want to know more about the story, and she might have not become an anime fan without this by-chance encounter. Also, the outstanding art style can be the main driving force for anime fans to watch an anime. For instance, *Violet Evergarden*, which is famous for its delicate art style, was mentioned multiple times by three interviewees, and they all pointed to the art style as the most outstanding aspect of the anime. Nevertheless, none of them mentioned other parts of the work, for instance, the story, concept, or characters. Therefore, while the superior art style satisfies the aesthetic pursuit of the audience, attracting them to and keeping them watching the anime, it might overshadow other aspects of the piece.

The plot or narrative is also an important factor that attracts people to watch an anime. How stories can be attractive varies, but one point several interviewees mentioned is that they are "different". For instance, Bard said that he was deeply moved by the portrayal of the intimate relationship between the female characters in *Revue Starlight*. He said, "it is completely different from the cliché portrayed in Hollywood romantic movies. It might not be romance, but it is more than that." The pursuit of something different from the mainstream media embodies the essence of subculture as a distinctive group: fans look up to the alternative stories and values in anime, which are usually undermined or overlooked by dominant cultures [2, pp.269-270]. Another way storytelling appeals to the fans is by resonating with their identity and experience. For instance, Lucian, who is ethnically black, found the anime portraying people of colour impressive. A female participant, Janna, mentioned that she appreciates how *Jujutsu Kaisen* creates a group of independent and powerful female characters. She said, "I really like how the female characters are written. […] I really like Maki. She's just… so strong, stronger than many other male characters, and she never depends on others." Moreover, Elisa spoke of herself as being a part of the LGBT community. She put, "when I watch anime or read manga about other people in the same situation as myself, it's a bit comforting sometimes because you think, well, another person has gone through the same thing as me." The audience is usually emotionally involved in the anime and tends to identify with the characters. Therefore, when the story resonates with their real-life experience, the impact of the story is amplified.

4.2 Consumption of Anime

Concerning the consumption of anime, the participants have invested a lot of time into anime, making it a part of their lives. Most participants had their first contact with anime at a young age and have enjoyed watching it ever since. Regarding the way of watching anime, all participants said that they watch anime through online streaming weekly. The long and constant investment of leisure time into anime shows that anime has already become an indispensable part of their life, echoing the

commitment aspect of subculture [5, p.31]. In addition, as to the specific platforms they often use, several people mentioned anime websites without copyright. For instance, Janna revealed that she sometimes watches anime on "illegal websites", and when the author reconfirmed, she said, "I will not lie," and defended, "I got a good cause. *Crunchyroll* (a popular streaming website) didn't have all the ones I wanted to watch." Her attempt to justify herself reflects her inner struggle of committing an "illegal" act, and her decision to watch a favourite anime in a way that contradicts her will to be a legally concerned person verifies her passion and commitment to anime.

Regarding the preference for anime genres, the participants demonstrated a wide range of interests. Lucian said, "I watch almost all kinds [of anime]. I'm not picky." Similarly, Leona put, "I tend to watch anything I can get." Moreover, when it comes to the question "what's your favourite anime genre?", other participants were also unable to give a specific answer. Furthermore, in the casual discussion about favourite anime works, several participants mentioned multiple pieces that are different in genre. For instance, Elisa brought up *Banana Fish* and *How to Keep a Mummy* as her two favourites. While the former, in her own words, is a "traumatising" tragedy that focuses on "real-world issues", the latter is a slice-of-life anime talking about a fantasy of a boy keeping a tiny and cute mummy as a pet. The wide acceptance of different genres among fans is essential to the development of the subculture of anime. As a large number of fans are open to a wide range of works, more works can attract a satisfying amount of attention and profits, ensuring the development of the whole industry.

Furthermore, although anime is powerful in creating transmedia consumption by constructing the story world in multiple media forms [15], the interview subjects did not demonstrate a strong interest in cross-media content. Although most participants said that they also read manga, several of them pointed out that manga is less accessible compared to anime. One exception would be Leona, who said that she read manga more because it is "easier to read". Also, although some mentioned that they also play anime-inspired mobile games and board games, they denied that their passion for anime is the main reason for playing the game. For instance, Lucian said that he played the card game *Yugioh*, which shares the worldview of the anime with the same title. Nevertheless, he also pointed out that although the anime brought him into the game, the gameplay and strategic aspect of the game motivated him to keep playing the game and refining his techniques. Moreover, the passion of an anime does not always draw fans to its related content. When discussing his favourite anime *Revue Starlight*, Bard commented that he knew that there was a mobile game under the IP, but he had not tried it. "It only has a Japanese server," he said, implying that the language barrier is the main reason that kept him from playing the game. Despite the globalisation of the anime industry and its fan community, the niche nature of anime still prevents some of the content from being consumed globally.

Regarding monetary expenditure on anime, the participants held different opinions. Bard, who is from an affluent family, perceived purchasing anime-related products as an essential part of his fandom. He contended that "spending money [on anime and related products] makes me happy." He proudly told the researcher that he had spent 5,000 pounds buying figures for his favourite character. For him, paying for anime merchandise and content he loves is an empowering experience. This echoes Tariq and Nesti Willard's discovery that anime fans are usually willing to spend money on related products to support the creator [10, p.195]. In this sense, fans embracing consumer behaviours cannot be simply understood as "cultural dupes"; they serve as active agents that reimburse the creators and encourage them to produce more work, which benefits the long-term development of the subculture. Moreover, collecting anime products is proof of one's passion and dedication to the subculture, and by doing so, fans feel more emotionally attached to the anime and the character, strengthening their identification with the subculture. Nevertheless, some participants were more sceptical regarding a large amount of expenditure on anime and related merchandise. For instance, Leona said that she is always worried about spending too much on figures and manga and that she is pleased that she managed to control her expenditure at the last anime convention under 100 pounds. The variation in opinion is a part of the dynamic of the subculture group and might be relevant to the economic condition of the individual.

4.3 Engagement with the Community

The study finds that although participation in offline activities is different, anime fans are willing to participate in the interaction to establish identity and promote the development of the fan community. The majority of the participants said that they enjoyed communicating with fellow anime fans online. For instance, Janna said, "I usually look for recommendations [of anime] on Instagram, and I am following some people who regularly post anime they like." Since the subculture group of anime is not big, fans can easily find their community on the Internet, where like-minded people can easily gather and communicate. Moreover, Elisa said that she sometimes gives feedback to anime and manga creators on Twitter, pointing out which part she thinks is good and which is not. Elisa's example demonstrates that the Internet space not only makes communication among fans easier but also enables the direct feedback loop between creators and the audience. It is also a pleasure for the fans as they can find a way to express their feelings about their favourite work and are even empowered to help make improvements. Moreover, this behaviour echoes the insight provided by Turk [16] regarding the gift economy in fandom. She contends that the circular giving of gifts is a significant aspect of community building of fandom, and creative labour, instead

of money or commodities, is the most valued gift [16]. While posting comments, Elisa is exerting her creativity and knowledge to interpret and evaluate the work, which is a form of creative labour and a reciprocal gift to the creator. With praise and suggestions, creators gain motivation and have a clearer direction on how to improve their work, bringing better work to the community. Furthermore, by posting the feedback on social media, the message is not only directed to the creators but also to fellow fans, who can all share the fruit of this labour and gain inspiration. Consequently, they may respond to the comment, passing down the linkage of gifting.

On the other hand, informants had different opinions regarding offline social events. The three native students considered the social events essential to their fandom and spoke highly of the anime events. When talking about his experience at the Comic-Con, Lucian said it was his first time at the event, so he did not have a specific aim or plan, but he still had a great time. He concluded that "it is always easier to talk with like-minded people with similar interests." Leona also said that she was glad to see the passion of other anime fans, especially fan arts and cosplay inside the venue. These comments demonstrate that, apart from the online space, anime events provide physical space for anime fans to communicate and express themselves. Moreover, even if they are not doing anything specific, the atmosphere alone is already attractive and pleasing for the fans. Being surrounded by anime content and fellow anime lovers brings them joy and a sense of belonging, enhancing their self-identification and pride as members of the vigorous group. This can also resonate with the identity aspect of subculture groups.

Unlike the above three native students, international students showed less interest in offline socials. Bard and Janna indicated that they rarely search for in-person connections with other anime fans except inside their existing social circle. This might partially come from their socialising preference, but more likely from their perception of their identity. For instance, Bard mentioned that "there is no meaning in going to events because it is only a place for people to gather using anime as an excuse. People are either there to cosplay or to see cosplay. They ask to take a photo with the high-quality cosplayers. Do you have the courage to do that? Well, I don't." Janna held a similar opinion and said that "anime is still a niche hobby." Their poor evaluation of offline gatherings might partially stem from their relatively introverted personality, but more likely from their perception of their identity. Identity is an essential element of all subcultures. While Bard and Janna are insiders to the subculture group, their identities as international students intersect and deprioritise them as they engage in social events alongside local students. This might deter them from participating in offline gatherings. Moreover, another international student, Riven, mentioned that she felt that her fandom was not deep enough, so she feared that she would be unable to find her place at the events. Her words imply that she perceives a hierarchy of fans inside the community, largely based on knowledge and passion for anime. Berzano and Genova [17] argued that subculture capital decides the status of the in-group individuals, and Riven's case supports this theory. Knowledge and passion can be interpreted as the cultural capital in the anime fan subgroup, and Riven, who perceives herself to have less capital, might feel discouraged to participate in offline events due to the fear and inferiority of being with people from a higher in-group hierarchy [18].

Furthermore, the interviewees present a strong lineage of fandom. Most participants tend to introduce anime to their friends, expanding the fan community. For instance, Janna talked about how she got her two elder brothers into anime, and Leona proudly said "I'm actually the one that influenced the majority of my friends into watching anime." When making these statements, the two had bright smiles on their faces and their voice was filled with joy. Apparently, they feel great pleasure sharing their hobby with more people. This follows the argument of Muggleton [19] that subcultures have the desire to expand. As more people have been brought into anime, the community gets bigger, and there will be more communications and more potential producers of fan content and anime knowledge, benefiting the subculture group as a whole.

4.4 Gaining from the Experience

To start with, anime is a source of entertainment that adjusts the psychological condition of anime fans. Several participants said that they are relaxed while watching anime. On the other hand, Elisa pointed out that when she is under the pressure of coursework, she will watch relaxing anime to escape the real world. She said, "I am sort of escapism, and that's why when I was studying quite a lot, I just went into anime. […] Because you just could kind of switch off and just laugh a bit." However, she would enjoy a thriller or battle anime to find stimulation when she is less occupied and stressed. This reflects the basic function of anime as entertainment, which gives the viewers joy and vigour.

Moreover, the majority of participants demonstrated a passion towards creation as a part of their interaction with the media and the fan community. This is supported by the argument by Rich --- fans' consumption practice usually leads to creative intervention, and accords with the observation made by Jenkins --- fan culture as a participatory culture [9, p86; 20]. Creative behaviour can take many forms. For instance, Elisa talked about her passion for cosplay. Cosplay is the fan behaviour of dressing up and imitating the characteristics of certain characters. Cosplay is a creative process as the cosplayer has to find or even make the appropriate costumes and props, put on make-up, get into a similar hairstyle, learn about the personality and behaviours of the character, and creatively reproduce them. Elisa said, "cosplaying is quite an empowering experience because you've [like] done yourself up. People recognise you. People want to talk to

you. It's just nice." Elisa's recount echoes the characteristics of participatory culture, in which people value the feedback on their creative contributions given by fellow fans [20]. The considerable effort in the creative process and the result, high-quality cosplay, are recognised and admired in the fan community, which, in return, brings a sense of achievement to her and reinforces her identity as a dedicated anime fan. Bard also included creative practice in his fandom, and it is the creation and passing down of knowledge, another form of creative contribution identified by Jenkins [20]. In the interview, he deeply impressed the author with his long and detailed analysis of his favourite anime *Revue Starlight*. He went into depth on examining the characters, their relationships, behaviours, and motivations, and he gave his perspective on the metaphor of the abstract visual expressions used in the anime. His scrutiny of the scene and text came from his passion and contributed to knowledge creation and sharing in the anime fan community, which brings him a sense of mastery. On the other hand, Janna, who studied art in high school, talked about how anime introduced her to fan art and changed her art style. During the interview, she showed the researcher some drawings and explained the details and techniques, demonstrating her passion for creation. For her, anime and fine art not only offer a way to exert her imagination but also help refine her art skills.

The creative engagement of anime fans embodies all the four elements of subculture subsistence as identified by Hodkinson [5] in the subculture theory framework. First, the shared willingness to create can be interpreted as an aspect of the consistent distinctiveness of the fan group. Second, all creative behaviours are time-consuming and require pertinent skills and knowledge, involving great commitment. Third, the appreciation from fellow fans endows the creators with a sense of achievement and status in the community, strengthening their identity as anime lovers. Fourth, all creative activities by the fans are spontaneous and not profit-driven, demonstrating the automatic nature of the production of cultural values in the community.

4.5 Influence from the Larger Cultural Context

Scholars have argued that fan cultures cannot be separated from social and cultural backgrounds [4]. However, in this study, the social and cultural contexts have a limited effect as no conspicuous geo-cultural specificities in the anime fandom of the research subjects can be found. Firstly, the results generated from the interviews are very similar to the existing studies on anime fandom in other countries. Secondly, despite the diversity in cultural, educational, and ethnic backgrounds, most participants provided overlapping responses. Thirdly, international students claimed that their involvement with anime and fan society remains largely unchanged after moving to the United Kingdom. Although international students seem to be less motivated to participate in offline fan gatherings compared to native students, we cannot see a clear connection between this and the British cultural context, and it is likely to be affected by multiple factors such as personality and identity as a foreigner. Nevertheless, some macro factors might influence fandom in subtle ways, for instance, the different accessibility of anime content in different countries because of copyright and censorship issues and the language barrier that prevents non-Japanese speakers from accessing content that is only available in Japanese. The scarcity of influence by general cultural background shows that anime is a subculture with translocal characteristics, in which participants, despite geological boundaries, have shared identity and value [5, pp.24-28]. The anime industry is global as anime is consumed and loved by audiences around the world; the fan community is transnational as the Internet enables fans from all over the world to share opinions, knowledge, and resources. Therefore, while the subculture group exhibits diversity from one country to another, they are more similar than different. Moreover, it might be useful to consider the cultural blocks and threads theory proposed by Holiday [21]. He defines cultural blocks as seemingly "uncrossable cultural barriers" produced by different big cultures, for instance, national cultures, and cultural threads are those shared cultural aspects that help connect people despite the blocks. Based on this theory, anime fandom can be considered a cultural thread that aids students from diverse cultural backgrounds to connect and communicate.

5. Discussion

The study provides insights into the anime fandom of British university students, which has not been carefully examined in previous literature. Moreover, the results offer several implications for the globalisation of anime and anime fandom. The Internet has facilitated communication among anime fans and even conversations between fans and creators all over the world. This helps construct the global community of anime online, fostering the sharing of passion and knowledge, and it partially explains why the anime fandom is more translocal. Moreover, digital streaming platforms such as Crunchy Roll enable foreign fans to access anime easily. However, the content is limited, and fans still have to use pirate websites to watch some less popular work. Therefore, the anime industry should seek to further exploit the foreign market by facilitating cooperation with digital platforms and reinforcing copyrights.

The study also comes with limitations. One of them is that it is difficult to discuss the influence of gender on anime fandom. This is due to the small sample and the uneven distribution of gender in the participants, which makes it difficult to compare the experiences of male and female interviewees. Many studies have demonstrated that gender, in more socially constructed terms, has an unneglectable influence on fandom. Apart from the

aforementioned observation by Rich [9] and Tariq and Nesti Willard [10], scholars have been arguing that some fan behaviours are dominated by a certain gender (for instance, see [22]). This is vaguely supported by the data gained from this study, as Bard, identified as male, is ardent about collecting character merchandise, a type of curatorial fandom, which is more common among male fans [23]. Nevertheless, more data from participants of both genders will be needed to validate this conjecture. Therefore, future research should find a larger sample and combine quantitative methods in further exploring the relationship between gender and fandom.

6. Conclusion

By analysing the six interviews, the study identifies the character, art style, and plot of anime as three main aspects that appeal to anime fans in British universities. Regarding the consumption of the media, this paper finds that all the participants take watching anime as a part of their lifestyle. Although some consume anime-related content in other media forms, it is not a common practice. Moreover, the perception of expenditure on anime and relevant products also varied among the interviewees. Regarding the involvement in the fan community, all participants engage in online discussions, but only a part of them go to offline social events. Moreover, people benefit in various ways from anime and social experiences. By watching anime, anime fans adjust their mood and gain inspiration from the stories; by engaging in the fan community in various ways, they achieve a sense of accomplishment, self-development, and belonging. Lastly, the study suggests that anime fan culture as a subculture is more translocal and less affected by larger cultures. Nevertheless, it may still be impacted by transmission and accessibility issues. Despite some limitations, the study has the potential to pave the way for the further exploration of anime subculture in the United Kingdom and provide a reference for future studies to examine anime fan culture in different regions through a translocal view.

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